AMERICA PICKS AND CHOOSES AMONG EXTRA-LEGAL ENTITIES DESTABILIZING THE WORLD

I wanted to add to what David Dayen had to say about these two stories.

Last week, the WaPo quoted at least two military figures stating, as fact, that the Taliban was a bigger threat to the US mission in Afghanistan than corruption. Based on that judgment, the WaPo suggests "military officials" are now pursuing a policy of tolerating some corruption among Afghan allies.

> Military officials in the region have concluded that the Taliban's insurgency is the most pressing threat to stability in some areas and that a sweeping effort to drive out corruption could create chaos and a governance vacuum that the Taliban could exploit.
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> "There are areas where you need strong leadership, and some of those leaders are not entirely pure," said a senior defense official. "But they can help us be more effective in going after the primary threat, which is the Taliban."
>
> [snip]
>
> Kandahar is not just a Taliban problem; it is a mafia, criminal syndicate problem," the senior defense official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject. "That is why it is so complicated. But clearly the most pressing threat is the Taliban."

Now, the WaPo headline suggests this is

definitely the plan, but the story itself admits
that it is unclear whether everyone in the Obama
Administration agrees with the plan.

> It was not immediately clear whether the
> White House, the State Department and
> law enforcement agencies share the
> military's views, which come at a
> critical time for U.S. forces in
> Afghanistan.

Indeed, the WaPo piece anonymously quotes an
adviser (apparently, but not certainly,
civilian) advocating for a crackdown on
corruption. And it acknowledges that earlier
this year some diplomats and military leaders
called to arrest Ahmed Wali Karzai, but Stanley
McChrystal scuttled the effort.

So it seems this initiative may come from the
DOD side, and if this represents Administration
(as opposed to DOD) policy, then clearly not
everyone has bought off on it. Which makes it
worth cataloging those in the story who might
qualify as the "senior defense official"
endorsing this new policy. The story quotes the
following:

- Robert Gates, introduced in
  an apparent non-sequitur
  between two quotes from the
  "senior defense official,"
  visiting two Army units
  fighting around Kandahar
- David Petraeus talking about
  efforts to stem the US
  contract funds that fuel
  corruption
- Lieutenant General David
  Rodriguez, hailing efforts
  to set up councils of elders
  who can decide how to spend
  reconstruction funds

(Stephen Biddle, of the Council on Foreign Relations, is also quoted supporting this policy.)

Assuming the WaPo is following accepted practice about anonymous quotations, I'd bet a few pennies that the "senior defense official" declaring that the Taliban is a bigger threat than corruption or drugs is Robert Gates.

If so, it would mean cabinet member Robert Gates is pushing a strategy that acknowledges the danger of the criminal syndicates in Afghanistan, yet continues with the working assumption that the "primary … most pressing" threat is the Taliban.

The Taliban, mind you, not al Qaeda.

Now, as I repeat endlessly, the AUMF authorizing the Afghan war authorizes a fight only against those who,

> planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons.

So presumably top Taliban leaders (those who harbored al Qaeda), but not the lower grunts among the Taliban. And the continuing justification for our fight in Afghanistan is to prevent al Qaeda from regaining a haven in Afghanistan (presumably like the ones it has in Pakistan, Yemen, or Somalia, where were are nominally not at war).

But this senior military official standing in the immediate vicinity of Robert Gates says that the Taliban—the entire Taliban—is the primary threat, presumably meaning the biggest threat of al Qaeda regaining a haven to operate in Afghanistan, and not the people taking our reconstruction dollars and depositing them in Dubai banks.

Meanwhile, the NYT challenges the assumption that the Taliban are the biggest danger.

> What if government corruption is more dangerous than the Taliban?
>
> [snip]
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> In interviews [after a McChrystal-attended Karzai speech to 400 trial leaders in June], one after the other told stories that were both disheartening and remarkably similar. None of the men (they were all men) harbored any love for the Taliban. But they had even less love for their Afghan leaders.

The NYT goes on to explain that the US knows who the members of the criminal syndicates are—the ones shipping money to UAE and largely running the country—but they don't want to crack down on them out of fear of creating a vacuum of leadership the Taliban might exploit.

> The real difficulty, American commanders say, is that taking down the biggest Amfghan politicians could open a vacuum of authority. And that could create instability that the Taliban could take advantage of.
>
> American officers have every right to worry about stability. But the trouble with this argument is that, increasingly, there is less and less stability to keep. And, if Afghans like Mr. Mahmood and Mr. Hakimi are to be believed, it's the corruption itself that is the instability's root cause.

There's a lot to be said about what appears to be just the latest in an intra-Administration squabble on the right policy moving forward.

But it seems the entire debate is taking place at far too concrete a level, with the simple calculation that the Taliban (not al Qaeda) are

our designated enemy, and therefore we just have to focus our efforts on doing everything—including coddling corrupt officials—to defeat the Taliban.

That all seems to be divorced from the point: preventing Afghanistan from becoming a haven for al Qaeda again. Nothing more and nothing less.

Increasingly, our counterterrorism approach embraces the use of extra-legal means to combat terrorism: illegal drone strikes by CIA officers acting as (potentially) illegal combatants, the criminalization of war if done by our opponents, and the coddling of groups that—like terrorists—are extra-legal transnational organizations. All these transnational extra-legal organizations—and probably our embraced of extra-legal tactics, as well—destabilize the world and in places like Afghanistan (or Yemen or Somalia) they lead to failed nations that are precisely the kind of places that anti-American forces mobilizing the ideology of Islamic extremism take haven.

But aside from their opposition to the US and their even greater suppression of women, what separates the criminal syndicates from the Taliban aside from our support and our money?

At some point, the US needs to take a step back and consider the way all types of extra-legal multinational organizations—terrorist organizations, criminal syndicates/drug cartels, even some multinational companies—serve to destabilize nation-states and communities and thereby to exacerbate our vulnerability to all of them.

But right now, DOD seems to be doubling down on the more western-friendly version of extra-legal entity as a key to trying to defeat another extra-legal entity.